

50 Years of TESOL in Mexico: An Interview with Paul Davies

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Fifty years ago this year, Paul Davies came to Mexico from England by way of Spain to teach English. He began teaching at the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (UAP), but moved to the Anglo-Mexicana de Cultura in the Distrito Federal (DF) because of the student movements that were breaking out in Mexico, just as they were all over the world in the late 1960s. From the rooftop of his office at the Anglo branch on Insurgentes Sur, he and his co-workers watched armored cars and helicopters in Mexico City during the 1968 student movement. From his position at the Anglo, he was involved in another "movement" in Mexico: that taking place in the English language teaching profession. He was in the catbird seat² during major reforms in national public secondary school education, the beginnings of textbook publication specific to Mexico, and the founding of MEXTESOL. Past President of MEXTESOL, textbook author, and author of many articles on TESOL in Mexico, Paul Davies continues to be a part of the evolution of English language teaching in Mexico, and has most recently been consulting on projects in Hidalgo and the Universidad Iberoamericana in Puebla to develop local English language teaching programs in specific contexts in Mexico.

When Paul Davies participated in the 1^{er} Seminario Permanente de Lingüística Aplicada for the Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada a la Enseñanza del Inglés at the Universidad de Guanajuato in April, 2015, he agreed to let me interview him, and generously spent over an hour talking about the past fifty years of English language teaching in Mexico. Over a cup of tea in a plaza café, we had the following conversation, which has been slightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Amanda: You first came to Mexico in 1965, fifty years ago. What did you find when you got here?

Paul: '65, yes, in March. Almost exactly fifty years. I had come from Spain, where I had been teaching English for a couple of years, mostly in the British Institute in Madrid. It was pretty professional, although when they needed them, they employed a few people like me who didn't have much experience. But it was pretty professional, being the British Institute.

And then I came to Mexico and worked full-time at the UAP, and it was absolute chaos. It was a complete contrast with the British Institute where I had been working. At the British Institute, we all obviously used the same textbooks, we were visited and observed, you learned the methodology that was used, and everything was coordinated and organized. And then in the university in Puebla, and I suppose it was typical of

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² Catbird seat is a term used by the American author James Thurber in his short story by that name, published in 1942. Thurber adopted it from the baseball announcer Red Barber, who used it to express a unique vantage point, advantage, or enviable position, such as "when a baseball team had a comfortable lead" (Edwards, 1993, p.48).

universities throughout Mexico, it was absolute chaos. Every English teacher did their own thing. It was two different worlds. Two different English language teaching worlds.

You have to remember, of course, that English language teacher training courses were only just beginning in Britain and the United States at that time. So the professionalism *in* the British Institute was the professionalism *of* the British Institute. That is to say that people had some kind of humanities background, or a degree in English literature, as I did. The people in the British Council were writing around the world, getting textbooks published, and writing methodology books as well. And so it was professionalism largely within the British Institute, and all its tentacles around the world. But here, as I say, it was absolute, total chaos.

Amanda: What were the backgrounds of the other English teachers at UAP?

Paul: There *was* no teacher training at the time. There were no *licenciaturas* [BA programs] There was no teacher training for English teaching, except in the *Normales Superiores* [National Teachers' College], obviously with the intention to supply English teachers to the secondary school and public SEP [*Secretaría de Educación Pública*, Mexican Ministry of Public Education] *preparatoria* system. Apart from that, there was no teacher training, and so every teacher did their own thing.

I left the UAP after two years because of student troubles that were beginning. The University closed down for a number of months leading up to 1968, and so I went to the *Anglo* in Mexico City, which was very similar to the British Institute in Madrid. The British Council actually rented its offices from the *Anglo* at that time, so there was a lot of collaboration between the British Council and the *Anglo*.

When I went to the *Anglo*, a group of teachers, the director, and a couple of other people had started producing materials for the *Anglo*, and I was lucky, with two and a half years of experience of English language teaching, and half a year at the *Anglo*, to be invited to join the team. That was my first involvement in producing teaching materials.

In 1972-73, the federal secondary school program was changed. Ethel Brinton, who was director of studies at the *Anglo*, was friends with Bertha Gómez Maqueo, who was at the SEP. Bertha asked the British Council and the *Anglo* to provide training courses for English teachers in the DF to handle the new programs. I was the chief trainer and coordinator of the programs, and I had two very nice assistants from the SEP.

Amanda: What did the teacher training course involve? How did you design it?

Paul: Um, you know...a bit of experience, a bit of inspiration, a bit of lyricism (laughing). We gave seminars and workshops for teachers, and we observed teachers in their classes. We'd started giving teacher training courses in the *Anglo* for our own teachers, and then opened those courses to the general public, and I was one of the teacher trainers. So I applied my experience at the *Anglo* as best I could to the situation in the public secondary schools. So basically, it involved me having a look at the programs and designing a training course.

I had taught *prepa* for two years at the UAP in Puebla. Total chaos. Then I started training teachers and observing classes in secondary schools as a part of this training program. Very illuminating. Large groups, 50-60, sometimes more. But the programs did have a syllabus, which was a double-sided coin with a good side and a bad side. The

good side was it gave them some kind of guidelines of what to do, and the SEP authorized textbooks, so they could only use textbooks authorized by the SEP. All of that gave them foundations to work from. So it wasn't chaos, they weren't completely lost.

The negative side of it was centralization. Even within Mexico City, conditions were very different in different public secondary schools. A public secondary school in Polanco was very different from a public secondary school in Juan Escutia, which was one I visited several times. Juan Escutia is in the DF, but it is right beside Ciudad Nezahualc6yotl. You can imagine: 1973, Ciudad Nezahualc6yotl, dirt streets, no streetlights, and no drainage. It's a very different kind of context. When you get centralized teaching all over Mexico, that was the negative side of things.

Amanda: What kind of training did the teachers have before the teacher training by the *Anglo*?

Paul: Proper English teachers in secondary school were graduates from the *Normales Superiores*, and so they had rather old-fashioned English teacher training, with lots of stuff like history of the English language, literature, all that kind of stuff – trying to make it academic – and perhaps not enough practical classroom training probably.

Amanda: Was it state-of-the-art for those times?

Paul: No, but they were not in the wilderness. Bertha G6mez Maqueo knew a lot about English language teaching, and a lot of other people did as well. Although it probably wasn't state-of-the-art, they certainly were not in the wilderness. So the best graduates from the *Normales Superiores* had pretty good teacher preparation for those times.

But the *Normales Superiores* produced insufficient numbers of teachers, and so the missing numbers were made up with anybody who – there's probably a little bit of that going on now still – anybody who spoke a bit of English, who knew somebody in the system. And probably still a little bit of this now: "*Maestro Juan es maestro de matem6ticas pero no tenemos suficientes clases para su tiempo completo, entonces le damos una clase de ingl6s para que tenga dos clases m6s.*" "Does he speak English?" "Well, no..." (laughing). So it was a bit of everything.

Then you had the conditions as well, of course. You had groups of 50, 60, 70 students. Because remember this was the height of the population explosion. I think one should always bear this in mind when talking not just about English language teaching, but education, healthcare, housing, employment. You have to remember that when I arrived in 1965, the population was 45 million, and now it is 120 million. Although we complain about public services in Mexico, they've been battling with this tremendous growth of the population. That's an important consideration to take into account. 45 million to 120 million? What we are talking about is double or triple the population explosion of Europe in the 19th century, Dickens's age, the industrial revolution. How do they manage it? Not always well.

Then after 1975, the end of those training courses, MEXTESOL was off the ground, and so one of the things I was involved in was MEXTESOL.

Amanda: I have a photo taken in 1973, at about the time MEXTESOL was founded.



Note: Photo taken at the first MEXTESOL Convention in Tampico of founding and early members. Pictured from left to right are: Paul Davies, Jeremy Harmer, Leslie Adams, unknown, Richard Rossner, Esther Taylor, James Taylor, and Maria Jessen.³

Paul: Oh, my goodness gracious me. Yes, I look a bit different, don't I? These are not all the founders of MEXTESOL, but they include some of the founders. MEXTESOL was largely founded by people from the *Anglo*, and what was at that time the North American Institute, the *Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales*, which disappeared in the 1990s, I think it was, and some other Mexicans outside those institutions, including significantly Bertha Gómez Maqueo who was in the SEP. She later became National President of MEXTESOL. Several of us became National Presidents. I was for one year. So it was a Mexican, American, British group of ELT people, and it came out of those people in 1973 and onwards.

Amanda: How did MEXTESOL come about? What was the driving force for the people who started MEXTESOL?

Paul: I suppose it was this feeling that English language teaching is *de facto* a profession now, even though a lot of people doing it are not professionals. But it is a profession. It's established in Mexico, and it's growing in Mexico, both in the public and private sectors. And if you have a profession, you really need a professional organization to push things, promote things, and so on. So I think it was that kind of feeling.

I can't remember which year it was now – 1980, '81 – I became National President of MEXTESOL. It was growing, still dominated by American and British people from those two cultural institutions, but it was becoming more and more Mexican in many ways. It had its annual convention, and in the good times, the conventions grew to 3,000 people: a lot from the private sector, from the SEP, a lot of people from public education, universities, and so on. That was probably a big development in thinking in terms of professionalization. MEXTESOL has had quite a significant role in professionalization of English language teaching through its national conventions, regional conventions, the *MEXTESOL Journal*, and then they started summer courses and other courses. So MEXTESOL from its beginnings in 1973 has really been quite an important element in the professionalization of English language teaching in Mexico.

³ Photo and people identified by Paul, photo copied from:

http://www.mextesol.org.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7&Itemid=112.

Amanda: What do you think has had the biggest impact on English language teaching in Mexico?

Paul: I'm not sure it's worth worrying about what has had the biggest impact. I think what you see is a whole lot of substantial impacts, which together change the thing radically. Before MEXTESOL, you had the *Anglo* and *Relaciones Culturales* offering English language teaching courses to the general public. Then MEXTESOL. Then *licenciaturas* began opening up in the universities in the 1980s. Then you had the British Council and its agreements with the SEP from the 1990s, with the Cambridge COTE course, and other courses, including open BAs. One thing is not more important than anything else. It is lots of flowers in the garden.

Amanda: Do you believe it is a profession today?

Paul: I believe English language teaching is a profession, but I believe it's still a poor profession that's not totally professionalized or legislated. For example, when you think of the top professions, a doctor or a dentist, you cannot practice without having a degree and without being registered in the association of doctors and so on, and you can be struck off the list for malpractice and stuff like that. Those professions obviously have this system partly because it's a matter of life and death. In the sense of those professions, English language teaching isn't there yet, because you've still got lots of "illegitimate" practitioners. So it's a slightly wishy-washy profession, I suppose (laughing), and maybe it always will be because of its nature.

Amanda: Has it changed in the last fifty years, from the chaos you first saw when you started teaching in Puebla?

Paul: In one of my articles, I talk about the "academization" of English language teaching. Invented word I suppose, but what I mean is that in countries like Mexico, through the universities in particular, we have more and more people with Masters in Applied Linguistics, and English Language Teaching, and Doctorates in Applied Linguistics, and English Language Teaching. And yet, if you actually look at the English language teaching in the universities, not the *Licenciatura en la Enseñanza de Inglés* [BA in Teaching English]. That's something separate, but if you look at English language teaching for the undergraduates in general, for medical students, for engineering students, etc., it is pretty terrible still. So in some ways, a new professional pathway has been created where you can become an English teacher. You can get a Masters, and you can teach English teachers, you can get a doctorate, and you can teach English teachers and do research, and publish, and attend international congresses, etc. But in the English language classroom...we really aren't producing people to teach the undergraduates in the universities, in the *prepas*, in the secondary schools, etc. And that hasn't changed very much. I think there are all these people flying up in the clouds, and if you look back down on the ground, it's not very good.

Amanda: Looking back at your fifty years in this profession, what has been your greatest satisfaction, what are you proudest of?

Paul: More than being "proud of," I think it's "being happy with". You see so many people who are unhappy with their work, unhappy with their profession, their lot in life. And I think I, and a lot of people I know in English language teaching, are happy that we fell into this. You see quite a lot of people who aren't particularly well-off, but they're

happy that they fell into this. It's nice working face-to-face with people, developing language, and along with language, all sorts of topics that you cover as you're trying to keep people interested in the topic as well as the language. It's being happy with things. I'm happy and feel myself very lucky to have fallen into English language teaching: to have come to Mexico and done English language teaching in Mexico; to have gone into the *Anglo* and had the benefit of the people there who were doing new things, teacher training, writing materials, etc.; to have had contact with the public education system at different times, in particular in the last couple of decades; and to have gone into the British Council when it was beginning all these teacher training courses. All of that is really a reason for happiness. You know, here am I, semi-retired, and people come to me and say, "Would you be interested in helping us with this?" "Well, yes!" I feel as though I've won the lottery! How lucky can you be!

To conclude, Paul Davies has lived the professionalization of English language teaching in Mexico, and has seen it evolve from the "chaos" he found when he arrived, to the profession TESOL has become today. By sharing the "flowers in the garden", he has seen grow and bloom along the way, he has perhaps shown us future paths for development of the profession. I would like to thank Paul Davies for his time and patience in allowing me to carry out this interview for the MEXTESOL Journal readers, his openness in talking about what he has seen and experienced during the past fifty years, his extraordinary contributions to this profession, and his sense of adventure and happiness along the way.

References

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